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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002559

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MILF CONSULTATION: A FRESH MANDATE AND OPTIMISTIC
OUTLOOK

REF: MANILA 1857

Classified By: Political Officer Joseph Saus for
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (SBU) The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) held a three-day public consultation on the outskirts of Cotabato City May 29-31 to renew its negotiating mandate before heading into the next round of peace talks with the GRP. GRP officials describe the event as "the largest show of mass approval for the MILF ever." GRP officials believe MILF Chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim may be signaling to his constituents that a resolution to the conflict is fast-approaching. The massive display of support boosted the MILF's legitimacy in the eyes of its own membership, the GRP, and the international community. The crowd supported statements highlighting the ongoing peace process with the GRP, and Murad reaffirmed publicly the MILF's opposition to terrorism. The MILF also stated publicly its willingness to work with the GRP in arresting suspected terrorists and said it is "validating" a list of wanted terrorists in coordination with the GRP. However, to be credible, the MILF must take clear and concerted action against the terrorists sheltering in its midst. End Summary.

Mindanao's Woodstock

2. (SBU) The MILF concluded a three day "public consultation" on the outskirts of Cotabato City, Maguindanao Province, May 29-31. Although the MILF claimed an estimated four million supporters attended, these reports are likely exaggerated. According to Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) contacts, the event drew 200,000-400,000 participants. The consultation culminated on May 30th with a public rally attended by several GRP officials from the Office of the Presidential Adviser to the Peace Process (OPAPP), diplomats, NGO officials, and media representatives. OPAPP and MILF officials confirmed to poloff that nearly all the members of the GRP and MILF peace negotiating panels were present. In response to an MILF invitation to attend, Embassy sent a letter of support to Chairman Murad on May 27 (copy faxed to EAP/PMBS), but did not send an observer, citing logistical and security concerns. On May 30, an MILF representative reportedly read the Embassy letter to the crowd. Witnesses at the scene told poloff the crowd and MILF officials appreciated the Embassy's letter, which expressed US support for the peace process and mutual objectives that advance peace and development in Mindanao.

Marshaling Support For Peace

3. (SBU) The consultation, which succeeded in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of supporters, served to reinforce the MILF's mandate as the representative of the "Bangsamoro People" in peace negotiations with the GRP. (Note: The Bangsamoro (Muslim Nation) is defined as the Filipino-Muslim inhabitants of central and western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. They are from several distinct ethnic tribes. End Note.) President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA) in a May 30 press statement welcomed such peaceful, democratic, and people-based consultations in promoting peace and development, and expressed confidence that with the support of the international community, the GRP would be able to solve the decades-old peace problem in Mindanao.

4. (C) Presidential Adviser to the Peace Process, Secretary Teresita "Ging" Deles, was the highest ranking GRP official to attend. In her remarks, she noted the importance of hearing and acknowledging the will of the people. She noted OPAPP would also conduct in the coming months broad-based consultations among the different stakeholders. According to Ryan Sullivan, an OPAPP official and staff member of the GRP Peace Negotiating Panel with the MILF, the event was "the largest show of mass approval for the MILF ever." Secretary Deles and Secretary Silvestre Afable, the Chairman of the GRP Peace Negotiating Panel, who also attended, were favorably impressed, according to Sullivan. Sullivan said MILF

Chairman Murad appeared confident and optimistic, and may have been signaling to his constituents to prepare for a fast-approaching resolution -- perhaps as early as yearend.

MILF Unified In Optimism

15. (SBU) Chairman Murad, in his May 30th remarks and subsequent press conference, stressed the "new and fresh mandate" bestowed from the Bangsamoro people, according to transcripts provided to poloff. As their "legitimate representative," he stressed their "life-long dream to establish and develop (their) homeland as a permanent legacy to the next generation." Murad thanked GMA and Malaysia and Libya for supporting the peace process. He appealed to Christians to "cast aside mistrust of your Bangsamoro brothers," adding the "dividends of peace will be shared by the whole constituency in our homeland regardless of tribal or religious considerations." Regarding terrorism, Murad explicitly stressed, "We live for Islam and we will be most happy to die for Islam. But lest we are misunderstood, allow me to clarify that the MILF is very much opposed to any form of terrorism. On behalf of the MILF Central Committee let me state quite clearly, that terrorist (sic) and terrorism is incompatible with the MILF vision for the economic, cultural and political advancement of the Bangsamoro."

16. (C) High-ranking Central Committee members, Vice Chairman for Political Affairs Ghazali Jaafar and Vice Chairman for Military Affairs Aleem Abdul Aziz Mimbantas, parroted Murad's line. (Comment: Mimbantas has been identified as a militant hard-liner, but the English translation of his remarks (delivered in Arabic) were temperate. He invoked Koranic verses stressing that all Muslims are required to be peace-loving and to eschew violence that is "criminal, irrational, inexcusable, indiscriminate, and lawless." Copies of all transcripts will be faxed to EAP/PMBS. End Comment.)

17. (C) MILF adviser Musib Buat, a close Embassy contact, told poloff June 1 that the event was very positive and optimistic. According to Buat, the MILF held a private plenary session of "5,000 delegates" who supported a draft resolution endorsing the MILF's pursuit of a negotiated political settlement with the GRP on behalf of the Bangsamoro people. He stressed the MILF did not discuss specific details of the negotiations, such as the ancestral domain question of proprietary land claims and rights. Buat said these questions will come up for discussion in the next round of talks, tentatively slated for some time in June.

Joint Terrorist Hunt Slow-Going

18. (C) Buat confirmed to poloff, media reports of MILF pledges to "hunt down 53 Islamic militants" using the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) -- conceived in 2002 to jointly investigate and interdict suspected criminals and terrorists operating in MILF-influenced areas. He underscored the MILF was "validating" a GRP-provided list of suspects and that the coordination process was ongoing. (Comment: Since its inception, the AHJAG has been stymied due to mutual suspicions on both sides. While a potential mechanism for interdicting suspected "lawless elements," it appears the AHJAG may not yet be capable of moving against certain individuals on the list, which includes suspected terrorists linked to the Jemmah Islamiyah (JI) and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). End Comment.)

Comment: Transforming The PR Victory Into A Lasting Peace?

19. (C) The MILF has clearly renewed and reinforced its negotiating mandate. By mobilizing its supporters, the MILF has gained legitimacy as a negotiating force in the eyes of its constituents and, perhaps most importantly, the GRP. The MILF is likely to use this demonstration of legitimacy to strengthen its negotiating position in the upcoming talks, tentatively set to resume later in June 2005. The MILF's public statements against terrorism are welcome, but not ground-breaking. We have heard such public pledges before. To be credible, the MILF must take concerted and clear action against the terrorists sheltering in its midst. End Comment.

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